

How far did England change under the Norman conquest?

1 Peasants still had to farm the land so that they had enough to eat. It did not matter if their lord was Norman or Saxon. The Normans didn't change how land was farmed.	2 William changed few laws when he became King. He simply told his barons to be strict so that the country was safe for everyone. So, under William, England became safer and more stable.
3 There were greater punishments for people who killed animals in the King's forest. If caught, people could lose their fingers - or worse.	4 Norman bishops built cathedrals in places like Winchester. Ordinary people were ordered to help with the building work.
5 Some people began to call their children French names such as William, Robert and Henry instead of old Saxon names like Ethelred.	6 Castles dominated many villages and towns. The English had not built castles before 1066.
7 The fastest way to travel was still on horseback, but most people had to make do with walking. They used oxen to pull their ploughs and carts for carrying heavy weights. The Normans did not make travel faster or introduce any new machines to make work easier.	8 The Normans used the same medical treatments and cures as the Saxons. They used cures based on herbs that were handed down through families or they used charms and chants to scare away evil spirits.
9 After 1066 people still wore the same kinds of clothing and lived in the same types of houses as they did before the Norman Conquest. The new Norman kings and lords were interested in governing England and making themselves rich, not in changing how ordinary people lived.	10 The Normans spoke a language called Anglo-French. When William became King, the official language at court and in the law courts was Anglo-French instead of English. Many people started to learn the new language, either on purpose or by accident.

Extract from Simon Schama's book, 'A History of Britain'

Historians like a quiet life, and usually they get it. For the most part, history moves at a deliberate pace, working its changes subtly and incrementally. Nations and their institutions harden into shape or crumble away like sediment carried by the flow of a sluggish river. But there are moments when history is unsubtle; when changes arrives in a violent rush, decisive, bloody, traumatic; as a truck-load of trouble, wiping out everything that gives a culture its bearings – custom, language, law and loyalty. 1066 was one of those moments.

It is certainly true that, for the majority of the population of Anglo-Saxon England (let alone the rest of Britain), 1066 was mostly a matter of exchanging lords. The slaves at the bottom of Anglo-Saxon society who could be bought and sold could hardly have cared less what language their masters spoke. Peasants ploughed their fields, fed swill to their pigs, prayed to avoid poverty and pestilence and watched the seasons roll around.

It is true that every spring, the grass came up green again. But in 1066 there were bones under the buttercups and the entire governing class of Anglo-Saxon England, some 4000 or 5000 lords, had been made to vanish and power, wealth, men and beasts had been given to foreigners. You could survive and still be English. You could even speak the language. But politically you were now a member of an inferior race. You lived in England, but it was no longer your country.